

Button Head

Back in the late '80s, I worked for a U.S. Department of Energy laboratory in the American Southwest. A set of sprawling cities-within-cities, the DOE lab complex employs thousands of people, with work ranging from computer science, physics, and chemistry, all the way to important infrastructure jobs like construction or security. I worked on mainframes at the time.

Like any secure government facility, this particular complex had a set of colorful local legends that over-dramatized the "mysterious" work we performed. People were convinced that the labs held evidence that aliens had visited us in the '50s, or that we'd developed a neutron bomb capable of wiping out cities without destroying any buildings, or that we were sitting on cold fusion technology, but were keeping it a secret to protect the interests of big oil. These are all completely false. In reality, the labs were run much like any other company - we had timecards, deadlines, department meetings, and boss's day lunches, just like everybody else. Despite (or perhaps because of) the reality of mundane lab work, staff often got a kick out of perpetuating these myths. While on a lunch break, I was once asked if I'd ever been to the flying saucer hanger. "Which one?," I replied, "We've got our own fleet."

More interesting, and often much more dark, were the stories that circulated between scientists and lab staff within the walls of the complex. One such rumor posited that physicists had briefly made contact with humans from the distant future, and that the transmission was I.B.D.: "Interesting, But Disturbing." Another popular rumor held that we'd created a biological agent so virulent that the labs had been forced to quarantine an entire building, raze it to the ground, and bury the rubble in the desert, along with its deceased inhabitants. My favorite story: Button Head is watching you.

In those days, the halls of every building were plastered with information security awareness posters, usually featuring a red-faced villain wearing a trenchcoat. Beware of your Adversary - protect your secrets! The enemy is always watching! Always

dispose of sensitive documents in a burn bag! It's likely that Button Head was a mishmash of popular alien myths and the pervasive atmosphere of cold war paranoia, and embodied the idea of an "insider threat." The Button Head legend went something like this:

When working late at night, be on the watch for Button Head, who prowls the laboratory halls after sundown. He can only get you when you're alone. He doesn't have a mouth to speak or ears to hear, but his eyes do more than see, and he's always watching.

According to witnesses, Button Head looked like a person from far away, but had a featureless, roundish head, with a pair of deep holes in the center of his face. Nobody ever said what Button Head was watching for or what he would do if he ever caught you alone. It was typically the older lab veterans who would bring up Button Head, along with hushed stories about the mysterious disappearance of several night-owl employees over the years.

During a retirement party, I'd jokingly asked the guest of honor if he'd ever seen Button Head.

"I saw it once, in one of the old warehouses way south of the tech area," he replied, cracking a forced smile. "I remember the smell, most of all."

"So is he an alien, or just a regular old ghost?"

The smile quickly drained away. He paused, looking like he might confess something important, but stopped short of it, muttering: "...no, it's much worse than that."

A few months later, I was pulling a late night in one of our mainframe rooms, performing some maintenance work with a coworker, a contractor named Gary. Gary, a bald, pudgy, diabetic Mormon, was a salt-of-the-Earth type with an easygoing demeanor. He had an "abbreviated" sense of humor, but didn't have a mean bone in his body, and was a good colleague. The mainframe room was in the largest single-story building in the

complex, with around twenty crisscrossing halls that seemed to stretch on to infinity. After working hours, most of these halls would fall pitch dark. Hall D, our mainframe hall, was still lit, but every other hall was a catacomb tunnel, with only the faint glow of the occasional vending machine to illuminate the faraway corners of the building. The mainframe computer room itself was large, but was stuffed with IBM System/370s and noisy, fridge-sized cooling units. It wasn't Feng shui or anything, but we loved playing around with computers so much that we didn't mind.

At around 9 or 10 that night, Gary left the room for a bio break, leaving me alone at my terminal. 30 minutes later, the lights flickered off. This was a frequent occurrence in the aging building, which was why we armed ourselves with flashlights for the late shifts. I noticed that Gary hadn't returned from the men's room, and as I felt the call of nature myself, I grabbed my EverReady and headed out the door to check things out. That's when I first noticed the smell. I tell folks that it smelled like "Mint gum and roach poison," but there was an indescribable and subtle sickness to it; I've never smelled anything like it since. It was the scent of something horribly unclean and unnatural combined with a potent, artificial sweetness.

I left mainframe room and hurried toward the men's room, which was two darkened hallways over. I made it five paces when I saw him, or it, or whatever it was; standing in front of the exit doors at the far end of Hall D was what looked like a man wearing a gray jumpsuit. Both it and I remained motionless as I trained my light down the hall. Seconds later, it broke into a speedwalk straight for me. It was still a few hundred feet away, but I could tell something was clearly wrong by the way it walked - it had an impossibly fast gait, like people from old newsreel clips - and by its head, which looked like an enlarged, lumpy orb. When its face came into view, I sprinted back into the mainframe room, which thankfully had a mechanical pushbutton lock.

The face was utterly unrecognizable. It was just a scattered set of abscesses and holes.

After slamming the door shut and backing toward the desks, a figure appeared in the small frosted safety window. It was quiet for a moment, and then it spoke:

"It's Gary. Let me in. I just saw something."

I couldn't hear it perfectly over the drone of the fans, but something wasn't right about the voice. It sounded like Gary, but as if he were leading some sort of spoken word chant with dozens of other voices. It instantly dawned on me that Gary knew the lock combination. I was paralyzed with fear, and didn't respond. At this point, the smell was so strong that it almost hurt to breathe. It spoke again:

"It's Gary. Let me in. I just saw something."

It sounded like an identical recording of what I'd heard seconds ago. My heart sunk when I realized that there weren't any other exits to the room. I backed up toward the machines, quietly hoping that the thing would go away and that the lights would come back on. A deep buzzing sound came from the other side of the door, followed by more words from the thing in the hall:

"Hello? Honey?"

The voice had the muffled pitch of a telephone receiver, but it was clearly my wife. It sounded like she was at home.

"Hon, is that you? Is everything ok?"

I was in a state of confusion, despair, and shock. I summoned the courage to approach the door, aiming my light through the window. "THE POLICE HAVE BEEN NOTIFIED," I yelled. This was impossible, as the mainframe room wasn't technically office space, and thus had no phone. I heard something that sounded like liquid being pulled up through a novelty straw, and then a splattering sound. A thick, white fluid slowly spilled out onto the vinyl tile from underneath the door.

The smell was nearly unbearable. I began yelling for help. I could hear the thing fumbling with the pushbutton lock. The splattering continued, and the dense, white syrup kept pouring in from beneath the door. I remember retreating to the back corner of the mainframe room, and then nothing else.

Hours later, A pair of MPs found me curled up in a ball and sopping wet in the rear corner of the mainframe room. My wife, who had received a call at 10:30 from someone she believed to be me, called the base police at midnight after I didn't return home. The guards didn't find any sign of forced entry, and there was no sign of Gary, or the white liquid. The next morning, my manager told me that Gary had terminated his contract earlier that week, and wasn't even scheduled to come in that day. I never saw him again.

My wife and I moved to California a month later.

Even though I work from home these days, my pulse still quickens when I walk down a darkened hallway. What stays with me the most is that strange, awful smell; It's probably just my brain playing tricks, but I swear it still wafts in through my windows some nights.